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ABSTRACT

Pennsylvania's Philadelphia School District has a high percentage of minority, bilingual, and low-income students and suffers from low student achievement, chaotic instructional organization, teacher shortage, dilapidated school facilities, and lack of accountability. Six community organizing groups are working with parents and youth for local and citywide school improvement: Asian Americans United; ACORN; Alliance Organizing Project; Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project; Philadelphia Students' Union/Urban Retrievers; and Youth United for Change. Data from surveys and interviews indicate that the six groups define their school reform mission as the development of youth, parent, or community leadership to fight for better and more responsive public schools. Most are building local and citywide organizations with the power to hold school officials and political leaders accountable. Most of the groups work with low income African American and Latino families, though some have multiracial membership. Organizing issues range from building conditions, safety, bilingual education, and student achievement to systemwide concerns about funding, academic standards, and access to qualified teachers and technology. Challenges they face include negative attitudes toward parents, youth, and community groups and instability within the school system. A directory of organizations is appended. (SM)

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

IN

PHILADELPHIA

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August 2001

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THE PHILADELPHIA CONTEXT

The City of Philadelphia sits largely between the Delaware River and its tributary, the Schuylkill River. The Delaware River runs from North to South, bounding the city on the east. The Schuylkill cuts through the western part of the city, separating the center city from west Philadelphia neighborhoods. The city itself resembles a grid, with Market Street dividing it east and west, and Broad Street dividing it north and south. Across the Delaware River is New Jersey, and to the south and west of the city are Delaware and Maryland.

The Philadelphia public school district is the fifth largest school district in the nation. With 264 schools serving over 200,000 students, the district is the largest in the state. Its enrollment is 70 times that of the average school district in the state. 80% of Philadelphia students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch, and approximately 10,000 students participate in bilingual or English speakers of other languages programs.

Like many urban districts, Philadelphia experienced rapid white flight during the 1970's as middle class white families moved out to surrounding suburbs. Two thirds of the District's students are African American, 12.6% are Latino, and 17.6 % are white. The district has engaged in a decades-long battle with the courts over how it will desegregate its schools. Successive superintendents proposed a variety of voluntary desegregation plans that were rejected by the courts. In a 1994 report to a desegregation judge, a panel of experts attributed the school district's continuing problems to an almost pathological disregard for the city's public school students. The panel indicted the school system for abysmally low student achievement, a chaotic system of instructional organization, school facilities in deplorable condition, and an outcomes reporting process that frustrated public accountability by hiding or mystifying the system's accountability data. The panel concluded that the city's failure to intervene to improve such a dysfunctional system represented "a massive failure of public will" and a forfeiture of hope for the futures of the city's public school children.

The Philadelphia Public Schools

Number of schools: 264
- 175 elementary schools
- 42 middle schools
- 47 magnet schools and neighborhood high schools (vocational and special)

Average school size:
- Elementary schools: 655
- Middle schools: 874
- High schools: 1388

Number of students: 208,170
- 65.1% African American
- 17.3% White
- 12.6% Latino
- 4.8% Asian

Data sources: Philadelphia School District. Data on school size are from 1996-97 as reported in the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform website, "Philadelphia, Just the Facts."

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The story of school reform in Philadelphia in many ways begins in 1994, with the appointment of David Hornbeck as superintendent. Although there had been a variety of school reform efforts before then, his arrival introduced new hope into the district. He introduced a comprehensive ten-point reform plan to re-organize the district, develop new standards, improve instruction, recruit and train new and effective school leadership, and increase the community services and supports for children's achievement. He also changed the way the district used data in its improvement planning and made this data available not only to schools but to the public as well. Hornbeck raised $50 million to support his school reform plan, largely through a challenge grant from the Annenberg Foundation. Part of this money passed through the district to support constituency organizing in school reform through a new and independent entity, called the Alliance Organizing Project, which will be discussed later in this report.

Hornbeck's plan was largely dismantled after his departure six years later, but his tenure was significant in opening up the Philadelphia school system to greater scrutiny -- and involvement-- by parents, community groups and other stakeholders. As much of the organizing described in this study took place during Hornbeck's tenure, the details of his reform agenda are described below.

The Children Achieving Ten-Point Plan

- Set high expectations for everyone.
- Design accurate performance indicators to hold everyone accountable for results.
- Shrink the centralized bureaucracy and let schools make more decisions.
- Provide intensive and sustained professional development to all staff.
- Make sure that all students are ready for school.
- Provide students with the community supports and services they need to succeed in school.
- Provide up-to-date technology and instructional materials.
- Engage the public in shaping, understanding, supporting and participating in school reform.
- Ensure adequate resources and use them effectively.
- Be prepared to address all of these priorities together and for the long term – starting now.

Governance and school reorganization. The Philadelphia school district is governed by a 9-member school board, which appoints the superintendent. The Mayor has unilateral power to appoint board members who serve 4-year terms. Students participate on the board as advisory members. Before 1994, the district was sub-divided into 8 sub-districts. Hornbeck attempted to re-organize the district to increase collaboration between schools, facilitate smoother transitions between elementary, middle and high school, and make the school system more friendly and accessible to parents and community residents. He restructured the district into 22 geographically based clusters that were anchored by a comprehensive high school, and included the feeder elementary and middle schools as well as

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magnet schools and special schools located within its geographic boundaries. Each cluster was staffed by a Cluster Leader, a Family Resource Network Coordinator and an Equity Coordinator, and was supported by a Cluster Resource Board, consisting of corporate partners, public and private agencies, employers, faith communities and school people, to facilitate greater public engagement in the schools.

At the school level, Hornbeck instituted advisory local school councils, consisting of teachers, the principal, non-teaching staff, elected parent representatives, and student representatives at the middle and high school levels. Councils review school-wide policies, achievement data and the school's budget, develop plans for increasing public engagement in the school, and participate in selecting the principal.

Hornbeck also expanded the number of small, theme-based learning communities in the district, which had been introduced in high schools in 1988 by the Philadelphia Reform Collaborative. Through this prior initiative, high school teachers were helped to restructure their schools into smaller theme-based schools or "charters" serving 200 to 400 students.[1] By 93, there were 94 charters in Philly, serving 20,898 of the 39, 803 children attending the comprehensive high schools.[2] Five years later, the district announced in 1998 that more than 130 such communities had been created in high schools, and more than 600 at the elementary and middle school levels.

Performance accountability. The centerpiece of Hornbeck's improvement plan was the introduction of higher standards, rigorous testing and the use of data to track student progress and hold schools accountable. Under the leadership of the district administration, a comprehensive set of standards was developed in the major disciplines for every grade. Working with the Philadelphia Education Fund, a major professional development effort was launched to train all the system's teachers in methods of classroom instruction that would effectively implement the new standards. District data show a gradual but steady improvement in elementary and middle school math and reading scores on the SAT-9 Achievement test between 1996 and 2000.

> Wrangling over education has become the new sport in the City of Brotherly Love—a dramatic change for a district once viewed as an unapproachable fortress. The public has been jolted awake by the scrutiny of schools that began in the fall of 1994 when Hornbeck, a prominent reformer, was hired to overhaul them.
>
> *Education Week*, February 19, 1997

School funding. Like many urban districts, Philadelphia has long been starved for resources. The district relies on three sources for funding: 1) local funds, mostly in property taxes, 2) state funds

[1] The district opposed the 1988 reforms, saying it would increase inequity by draining higher achieving students to some schools and away from others. The teachers union also opposed it because it involved teachers' waiving their contractual rights."

[2] Bradley, Ann (03/24/93): "Gains Seen in Philadelphia Schools with Charters," *Education Week*.

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(state aid and special program money) and 3) federal funds (special program money.)[3] As Philadelphia is both a city and county, it has the financial burden of having to fund countywide programs without support from its wealthier suburbs. Therefore, it relies heavily on funding support from the state. But, as a 1998 district report noted:

> State education funding has fallen significantly since the late 1970s, dropping far below what other states contribute to their schools. Pennsylvania now contributes an average 36% share of school districts' budgets, whereas the national average for state funding is almost 50%.... In addition, state funding has... [failed] to reflect the burdens of districts with greater enrollment and poverty.

The district launched an aggressive funding campaign to increase the state's share of district funding during Hornbeck's tenure, buttressed by the report from the 1994 expert panel on desegregation that estimated that the district needed at least an additional increment of $300 million annually to implement the reforms necessary to improve student achievement. The district sued the Pennsylvania governor and other state officials, claiming that the state's method of funding resulted in racially different results. In December 1999, the US Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that will allow the district's Title VI claim against the state to proceed to trial in federal court.[4]

The teacher vacancy crisis. The district has faced an increasing and critical shortage of teachers, particularly in bilingual and special education, math and science. Many teachers have retired in the past five years, and the district has struggled to find replacements. In September 2000, the district had about 200 teaching vacancies. This teacher shortage is exacerbated by the lack of funding, which contributes to the city's inability to attract and reta in teachers. Neighboring suburban school districts can afford to pay much higher salaries for teachers and principals. Community and civic groups believe the district's residency requirement for teachers restricts their ability to hire new staff, particularly in low-performing schools where the shortage is most acute. In 2001, the state moved to lift the residency requirement when the city failed to do so.

Teachers in the Philadelphia Schools

Number of Teachers: 12,800
- Percent above bachelor's degree: 65%
- Average years of experience: 5
- Beginning teacher salary: $31,344

Teacher Ethnicity*:
- 62.0% white
- 35.2% African American
- 1.4% Latino
- 1.0% Other
- .4% Asian

Data sources: Philadelphia School District. Percentages of teachers by racial/ethnic group are from 1993-94, as reported in the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform website: "Philadelphia. Just the Facts."

[3] Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform website, *Philadelphia. How schools and Districts are Administered.*

[4] Walsh, Mark (12/15/99), *High Court Allows Funding Suit in PA to Proceed to Trial*, Education Week.

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Public engagement. Locally, Hornbeck was successful in increasing business and philanthropic involvement in the public schools, as demonstrated by his success in attracting a large challenge grant from the Annenberg Foundation. But his support among parents and teachers was weak. Because of Hornbeck's data reforms, parents and residents, as well as school reform and other civic and advocacy groups, were now able to track student progress in mastering subject areas and in graduating from high school. Hornbeck's data reporting had succeeded in increasing constituency ability to hold schools accountable, but more open data disclosure also increased the public perception that the Philadelphia schools were hopeless. Some community groups also criticized the district's failure to support parent efforts to hold local schools accountable.

Teachers, who had been largely excluded from the process of developing the new district standards, felt alienated from the reform efforts. The teachers union locked horns with Hornbeck from the outset over his efforts to reform the scheduling process in the high schools and thereby reduce the power of entrenched high school departmental chairs. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), a member of the American Federation of Teachers, was itself criticized by both community and education reform groups for its negative stance towards working with parents. As one organizing group noted, the PFT "views everything outside the union as hostile."

At the state level, Hornbeck's school funding campaign antagonized key political leaders, including the Governor. Tensions reached a head with the passage of the Education Empowerment Act in the spring, 2000, which gave the state broad authority to intervene in the district if it failed to reach state-mandated standards on test scores within four years. The Act mandated the district to create an improvement plan in accordance with a state-specified blueprint. The district plan proposed developing a citywide curriculum, reducing class size to 17 through grade three, and allowing persistently failing schools to be taken over by private companies.[5]

New directions for the Philadelphia schools. Hornbeck departed in August 2000, after six years as superintendent, amid increasingly acrimonious contract negotiations between the district and the teachers union. Negotiations continued throughout the fall in starts and stops, punctuated by aggressive volleys in the press between the PFT president and the Mayor, a weekend strike, and the Governor's threat of a state takeover if a settlement was not reached quickly. The new contract, settled in November, introduced an enhanced compensation package to reward teachers for participating in professional development programs, provided bonuses for teaching in hard to staff schools, lengthened the school day, and gave individual schools the authority to choose their own teaching staff.

In 2000, the Philadelphia Board of Education replaced the superintendency with the corporate structure of a CEO and a chief academic officer. They appointed Philip R. Goldsmith as interim

[5] "District Advised to Boost Scores," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11/18/2000.

acting CEO, while launching a national search for a permanent leader. In May 2001, Goldsmith announced he would retain only two of the ten principles of Hornbeck's reform plan: accountability and the belief that all children can learn. He re-organized the district and replaced "the cluster system with [ten] academic offices" that would "develop a uniform approach to curriculum and instruction." He estimated that, "as many as 200 educators who were working in administrative roles [would] be asked to return to the classroom under the plan, which could alleviate a continuing teacher shortage, ... [and] save the district more than $60 million over the next five years."[6]

Hornbeck's tenure brought the Philadelphia school district into the twentieth century at the dawn of the twenty-first. He introduced an accountability system, opened up the Philadelphia schools to community scrutiny and participation, and improved test scores in the face of a hostile teachers union and the threat of state takeover. Nonetheless, the district has a long way yet to go. As the community groups profiled in this report will suggest, many schools are performing far below city and state standards, and are hostile to parent and community involvement. The district is facing an acute shortage of qualified teachers and it lacks adequate funding to fully address its many needs.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

This section looks at the work of six community groups organizing parents or youth for local and citywide school improvement in Philadelphia. Much of this organizing took place during the tenure of one superintendent, David Hornbeck. But during the relative stability of his six-year tenure, the system experienced a critical shortage of qualified teachers across the system and increasing tension between the district and the state over school funding. Two organizations discussed below began school reform organizing in the early 90's, three began in the mid-1990's, and one group began organizing last year.

Between July and December 2000, the Institute for Education and Social Policy collected data on community groups organizing for school reform in Philadelphia, as part of its national research on community organizing for school reform. Data collection occurred in three stages: First, we talked with school reform observers and organizations in Philadelphia to identify community-based groups organizing for school reform. Based on this information, we surveyed six organizations by telephone: Asian Americans United; ACORN; Alliance Organizing Project; Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project; Philadelphia Students Union/Urban Retrievers; and Youth United for Change. Finally, we interviewed three organizations: ACORN, the Alliance Organizing Project and the Philadelphia Student Union, to gather a more detailed description of how they carry out their work. We also reviewed printed materials developed by all six groups.

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[6] Snyder, Susan (5/1/01): "Schools to Disband 22 clusters for savings," *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Asian Americans United

Asian Americans United (AAU) is a multi-issue organization begun in 1985 to support Asian American communities in Philadelphia, in response to anti-Asian violence nationally and in Philadelphia in particular. Ellen Somekawa, Executive Director for AAU, defines the organization's mission as to help people of Asian ancestry in greater Philadelphia "exercise leadership to build their communities and unite to challenge oppression." The organization builds coalitions of residents and local organizations in Chinatown and South Philadelphia, provides a variety of services, and develops new programs to help support the development of healthy, viable neighborhoods for Asian children and families. AAU has run a citywide youth leadership development program for low-income youth of various Asian ethnicity, and has helped these youth to develop their own organizing campaigns. It has also organized low-income and working class Chinese and Southeast Asian adult immigrants around housing, public schools and work-related issues.

AAU's school reform organizing grew out of its work with youth. In 1986 AAU began a tutoring program for children in a local housing development, in which high school and college age youth were involved as tutors. Youth were asked to plan and implement a project or organizing campaign as part of the training experience. The effort, which later evolved into the Community Youth Leadership Program, enabled the organization to develop stronger links with the families in the housing development. It helped parents "begin to sense a degree of unity as tenants and then for their rights as parents," explains founding member Debbie Wei. It also taught youth "to investigate social conditions, to analyze issues, to articulate their ideas, and to work with others for social change."

> We use our summer community youth leadership project as a place to begin a dialogue with parents about what's going on in the schools.
>
> Asian Americans United

Since 1992, when AAU began school organizing, it has successfully countered negative attitudes of school staff towards Chinese students in Chinatown schools, the lack of bilingual education staff and programs for Asian students in the Philadelphia schools, and the lack of bus service for kindergarten students. At a citywide level, AAU supported a youth-led campaign against the proposed mass transit fare hike for students. With the Education Law Center, AAU brought a lawsuit against the district, which resulted in a district commitment to hire additional Asian bilingual staff and support staff. In 2000, AAU opened two Freedom Schools[7] in South Philadelphia and Chinatown, in

[7] The Freedom School is a national program that began during the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Volunteers within the movement taught African American students for approximately six to eight weeks during the summer using curriculum and instruction to promote equality, self-discovery, learning, social justice and community activism. The Freedom School has since evolved into a national program sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund. The schools provide ways for students, parents, and community leaders to come together to strengthen both educational opportunities and the fabric of neighborhoods, as well as achieve equality through advocacy and community organizing. (AAU, 2001.)

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collaboration with the Philadelphia School District. These schools integrate social action into the curriculum, and offer bilingual instruction for students.

AAU was formerly a sponsor organization as part of the Alliance Organizing Project. The organization participates in the Pennsylvania School Reform Network, which does state level advocacy on school reform issues and disseminates information to members, and is a member of the National Coalition of Education Activists. AAU recently began reassessing its focus on education in response to the changing demographics of the Asian immigrant population in Philadelphia. New members view work-related exploitation as a more critical issue than education.

ACORN

The Association of Community Organization for Reform Now (ACORN) is a multi-issue, membership organization that builds power for low and moderate-income people. The organization's members are predominantly people of color: 90% are African American, eight percent are Latino and two percent are white. As part of the ACORN national network, Philadelphia ACORN follows a model of building neighborhood-based committees that join in a citywide structure. The organization has chapters in seven Philadelphia neighborhoods: three are located in north Philadelphia, two in west Philadelphia, one in south Philadelphia and one in southwest Philadelphia.

> As a multi-issue organization, we can't ignore the public schools located in these neighborhoods. Their quality clearly affects the future of kids and their ability to be educated and enter the workforce. There are many disparities in education in this country and we're charged with addressing this issue.
>
> ACORN

ACORN began organizing public school parents for school reform in July 2000. As Jeff Ordower, Executive Director of ACORN explains, ACORN's focus on schools emerged from existing members' concerns about the schooling opportunities available to their children, the organization's analysis of the relationship between effective schools and strong neighborhoods, and the school reform agenda promoted by National ACORN. ACORN organizers passed out flyers outside of schools and canvassed their neighborhoods to bring in new members with an interest in organizing to improve their schools. In these discussions, class size and school funding were identified as critical issues around which to begin campaigns. Other potential issues include: the number of permanent teacher substitutes, school safety, school staff attitudes towards parents and students, and academic standards.

ACORN is engaged in a citywide campaign to address the chronic shortage of qualified teachers in the Philadelphia School District in collaboration with another organizing group, the Alliance Organizing Project.

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Alliance Organizing Project

The Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) is a single-issue, parent organization working for local and system-wide reform of the Philadelphia public schools. The Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) was founded in 1995, as part of then-Superintendent David Hornbeck's *Children Achieving* reform plan, and was initially supported by funds channeled through the Annenberg Challenge. AOP's work and strategy has evolved since it began in 1995. As Kelley Collings, Executive Director of AOP explains, AOP first worked through community-based organizations that sponsored organizers to work in each of 22 school clusters across Philadelphia. These organizers were responsible for building parent committees in some schools in each cluster, developing relationships between parents, teachers, and administrators, and for planning and carrying out local campaigns.

Three years later, in 1998, AOP shifted to a "direct hire" system to establish a direct supervisory relationship with organizers, and it consolidated its work to focus intensively on a smaller number of schools. The organization hired three full-time organizers to work directly with five schools, and added three schools in 2000, and two more in 2001. Its goal is to expand in the two clusters where it is currently working.

> Confrontation is not the cornerstone of our organizing strategy. We use a "relational" model of organizing in which any power is relational power. It's all about figuring out the self-interest we have in common with our targets.
>
> Alliance Organizing Project

AOP builds power by developing relationships with key educational and political decision-makers, such as teachers, administrators, district level staff and city leadership. AOP forms school-based parent leadership teams who develop local campaigns that involve school staff and administrators in working with AOP members to address school problems. Local parent teams meet once or twice a month and send representatives to a citywide leadership team. Parents must affiliate with a school-based parent team in order to join AOP. Members are predominantly low-income and working class; 50% are African American, 45% are Latino, and 5% are white.

Since its beginning, AOP parent teams have increased parent participation in the school-based parent groups, called Home & School Associations, and the local school councils. AOP parent leaders have helped develop budgets and school improvement plans, and have organized to address a number of school facilities and safety issues. AOP has started parent-run after-school programs in five schools, helped to introduce the Talent Development school reform model in one school and won additional resources for library books in another school. It has also helped parents work collaboratively with their school's principal to improve reading at several local schools

On a citywide level, AOP has engaged parents in fighting for system-wide policy reform. It waged a citywide campaign for more crossing guards, and is leading a campaign to address the chronic shortage of qualified teachers in the Philadelphia schools. This campaign helped establish a

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relationship between AOP and the teachers union and other education organizing and advocacy groups, including the Philadelphia Education Fund, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, the Education Law Center, the National Coalition of Education Activists and ACORN. AOP is also participating in the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education.

Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project

The Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP) is a faith-based, multi-issue organization that brings together twenty churches, public schools and neighborhood associations in the Kensington, Port Richmond, Hunting Park and Olney neighborhoods of Eastern Philadelphia. The organization formed in 1993 to "develop leadership, influence decisions that affect neighborhoods in Philadelphia, and build power to be at the decision-making table around public education and neighborhood development." EPOP reports a membership of over 20,000 residents; members are 20% African American, 35% Latino, 35% White and 10% Asian, they are predominantly low and moderate income. According to Gordon Whitman, formerly with EPOP, the organization works from a relational and institution-based model of organizing, and makes its initial contact with public school parents through their participation in its member institutions.

EPOP forms local school teams that join the organization as institutional representatives. Through one on one meetings and listening campaigns, organizers and core leaders identify local issues and work to develop relationships with key staff and administrators with the interest and power to improve the school. EPOP is currently working in five elementary schools, one middle school and a high school. Since it began organizing, EPOP committees have focused on reducing class size and improving academic standards and reading levels in local elementary schools, and increasing funding and access to technology. This organizing has resulted in improved reading levels in elementary schools and greater school leadership accountability, and it has resolved a number of safety and climate issues in EPOP schools. The organization recently began an internal reflection and self-evaluation process, and is exploring a strategy for developing a greater organizational presence at a citywide level.

> Our first step is to hold one-on-one meetings with parents. Then we bring people together for leadership training of four to six months. Then we do what we call listening campaigns. Parents hold "grade meetings" to listen to other parents' ideas and concerns, compliments and criticisms about the schools. These discussions guide our campaigns.
>
> Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project

EPOP was a founding member of the Alliance Organizing Project, and, until recently, received financial assistance and leadership development support from AOP. It is a member of PICO, which provides strategic support to EPOP on its education organizing campaigns. EPOP's member organization, Youth United for Change (YUC), organizes students in four high schools.

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Youth United for Change

Youth United for Change (YUC) is a youth organization made up of high school students. YUC was founded in 1991 and began schools organizing in 1994. The organization operates from a relational model of organizing and defines its mission as building power and leadership among youth to hold school and public officials accountable for better services and schools to meet their needs. YUC is a member organization of the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project, and organizes youth in four high schools. The organization has a multi-racial membership: 45% are African American and Latino respectively, and eight percent is White and two percent is Asian. Members live and attend neighborhood high schools in Eastern Philadelphia.

YUC grew out of staff concerns about the low quality of education provided by a local high school, explains Rebecca Rathje, Coodinator of YUC. The group builds independent student committees in schools, meeting with young people during the school day, inside of schools. High school committees meet on a weekly basis inside the school or in community spaces, depending on the issue and level of controversy with the school. Young people also participate in weekend and after school leadership training sessions, carry out surveys and listening campaigns in their schools to identify youth concerns. YUC has led campaigns on school safety, overcrowding, textbooks, school leadership and math and science curriculum. These campaigns have focused largely on mobilizing youth, although parents, teachers, school officials also participate.

> We organized around getting rid of general math and science courses at Kensington High School. Young people were taking four years of long division and never getting the geometry, or algebra they need to prepare for college. They're put in those classes because they come in with low skills and don't know these are irrelevant courses. They had no idea they should be taking algebra. Getting rid of those courses at Kensington also meant paying more for biology and geometry teachers. It was a first step towards getting more students prepared for college.
>
> Youth United for Change

YUC is a member organization of EPOP, to which it pays annual membership dues and receives technical assistance and support. EPOP and YUC have a mutually supportive relationship – for example, youth-members of YUC are able to move into parent organizing by becoming members of EPOP, and EPOP is able to refer young people to join YUC. The organizations also participate in joint actions. Through EPOP, YUC is affiliated with PICO.

Philadelphia Student Union

The Philadelphia Student Union is a project of Urban Retrievers, a youth-run organization that builds relationships between young people from different ethnic backgrounds, develops youth leadership, and promotes youth-led school reform organizing to ensure young people receive quality education regardless of race and class. The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) was formed in 1995 to bring

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young people together to improve their schools. Nine of the organization's twelve staff are high school students; members are 70% African American and 30% Latino from low income and working class families.

PSU works from a relational model of organizing and links school level issues to system wide organizing to bring about change. The organization began with a citywide focus on school funding and later shifted to a neighborhood-based approach to bring more youth into the organization. "It's important to do local work to make changes that are direct in people's lives and bring more people into the organization. But it's also important to understand the larger context and how it affects what happens locally. We have to work on both levels," explains Eric Braxton, Director for PSU. The organization has chapters in five schools that meet on a weekly basis to plan and carry out campaigns; representatives from the local chapters participate in a citywide committee.

Students seek larger role in schools

A Philadelphia student group wants more say in the running of the 210,000-student school district, including seats on the Board of Education with full voting power. The Philadelphia Student Union, a student advocacy group formed in 1995, also wants students to have a role in evaluating their teachers. The recommendations were among dozens urged by the union, which released its school reform platform yesterday at a news conference outside City Hall. More than 400 students, including representatives from all 42 high schools, spent a day at a North Philadelphia synagogue in late October and developed the Platform.

Philadelphia Inquirer, November 22, 2000.

As part of developing local campaigns, new members participate in an exercise where they define the elements of an ideal school. "Youth tend to believe that the way things are is the way they have to be," explains PSU's Executive Director, Eric Braxton. "Whenever new students come into the organization, we do a visioning exercise of what is their ideal school. Even if we're working on water fountains, it's important to understand that this is part of a struggle for something bigger." Local campaigns include: winning the addition of college prep work to local high school curriculum; developing a complaint process for students verbally or physically abused by school security; participating in the selection of the principal; and fighting for an alternative to metal detectors.

PSU is a member of the statewide education funding campaign, the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education.

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Mission, goals, constituency and scope of work

The six groups in this study define their school reform mission as the development of youth, parent or community resident leadership to fight for better and more responsive public schools. Most organizations are building local and citywide organizations that have the power to hold school officials and political leaders accountable for improving schools.

Several groups articulate the goal of building relationships between members and, in the case of PSU, fostering relationships between young people of different ethnic backgrounds. ACORN, EPOP and AOP work from a vision of building social capital, while AAU works from a vision of empowering the Asian community. Despite the differing guiding ideologies, the majority of groups' school reform organizing is part of a larger mission to increase democratic accountability over the institutions serving their constituencies. All of the groups are thus working to increase their members' role and influence in their schools.

> AAU exists so that people of Asian ancestry in greater Philadelphia exercise leadership to build our communities and unite to challenge oppression.
>
> Asian Americans United

Five organizations are individual membership organizations, while EPOP's membership is primarily faith-based organizations. Four of the six organizations operate from a relational model of organizing in which they build power by developing relationships between the organization and key decision-makers in the school system. AAU and ACORN work to build neighborhood-based, external and independent parent or youth groups that can put pressure on school officials from outside the system.

The groups vary in their target constituency, their scope of work and in how long they have been organizing for school reform:

Five of the six groups have been organizing on school issues for over three years. ACORN began school reform organizing in July 2000. AAU, which has a history of school reform organizing, is now focusing primarily on workplace issues.

Table 1 shows the organizing constituency of each group. YUC and PSU work with high school youth attending the public schools, while ACORN, AOP, and EPOP work primarily with adults. AAU has engaged both parents and youth in its school reform organizing.

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Table 1: Organizing Constituency

	YOUTH	PARENTS	NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS	AFRICAN AMERICAN	ASIAN	LATINO	ANGLO
AAU							
ACORN							
AOP							
EPOP							
PSU							
YUC							

Most groups work with low-income African American and Latino families. EPOP and YUC have multi-racial memberships, including African American, Latino, White and Asian populations. AAU works with Asian families, predominantly of Chinese and Southeast Asian descent. EPOP and ACORN view neighborhood residents as their primary constituencies, while the others generally view public school parents or youth as their primary constituencies.

Table 2 shows the scope of work by the organizations. AOP, PSU and YUC focus solely on school reform, while the remaining organizations have a multi-issue focus. Multi-issue groups work on a variety of neighborhood and work-related issues including quality of life, housing, and workplace exploitation. EPOP and YUC work in the eastern part of the city in the Kensington, Port Richmond, Hunting Park and Olney neighborhoods; AAU works with Asian populations in Chinatown and South Philadelphia. All six organizations work at a citywide level; ACORN, AOP, EPOP, PSU and YUC are currently participating in the state-level school funding effort, the Pennsylvania Campaign for Public Education.

Table 2: Scope of work

	SINGLE ISSUE	MULTI ISSUE	LOCAL ORGANIZING	CITYWIDE ORGANIZING
AAU				
ACORN				
AOP				
EPOP				
PSU				
YUC				

Organizing issues

As shown in Table 3, organizing issues range from specific concerns about building conditions, safety, bilingual education programs, and levels of student achievement in target schools to system-wide concerns about funding, academic standards and access to qualified teachers and technology. Most groups are working on more than one issue at both local and citywide levels.

Members generally articulate and define the issues that frame and drive the local organizing campaigns. Issues come out of one-on-one meetings between the organizer and youth or parents, and broader listening campaigns that the organizer and core leaders may carry out with other youth or parents and school staff. School climate and facilities are often foremost in these discussions and tend to be the entry points into school reform organizing. "A lot of times when we start in a school, our first concern is a physical building concern. We've dealt with dirty water fountains and graffiti. Once the youth have won on this level we've been able to push them to look inside the school," says Rebecca Rathje, Coordinator of YUC. Members' experience of success increases their sense of power, their commitment to the group, and renews their sense of hope that schools will improve.

Organizing issues are also defined by the organization's goals and vision. Most groups aim to build power for their constituencies, and therefore, select issues that will bring new members into the organization, and are winnable, or can be broken down into a series of smaller but winnable campaigns. The critical question groups must answer is whether they can win enough small victories to keep their memberships engaged. Groups often find it easier to draw new members into the organization through climate and facilities campaigns. These problems tend to be more visible than teaching and learning issues, the solutions are generally more clearly understood, and the targets are more easily defined.

The focus on winnable issues does not mean groups avoid instructional issues. AOP's vision of "parents as decision-makers" has led them to use school decision-making teams to shape school budgets and improvement plans. It also led them to fight their way into union contract negotiations to raise the problem of teacher vacancies in the district. PSU similarly works from a view of increasing the influence of youth in their schools and has focused on establishing a greater role for youth in school decision-making.

Moreover, a number of groups are working on improving reading and math curriculum and instruction in their schools. Youth United for Change led a campaign to replace general math course-work with more challenging curriculum that would better prepare students for college. EPOP and AOP parent leaders have met with teachers to develop proposals for improving instruction. In one school, AOP and the PFT worked together on a library improvement campaign.

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Table 3: Organizing Issues

Facilities and school climate • Kindergarten bus service • Overcrowding • Crossing guards • Bathroom policies
Improving teaching and learning in low performing schools • Number of permanent teacher substitutes • Class size reduction • Academic standards • Reading levels • College preparatory curriculum
Equity and racial justice • Staff attitudes towards youth • Access to bilingual education • Arbitrary suspensions of youth • Library resources • Technology access • Funding • Math and science tracking
Access and accountability • Principal and staff attitudes towards parents • Parental access into schools • Student and parental participation in principal selection • Parent involvement in school policy decisions • School council elections

Issues that cut across the local committees become the focus of citywide campaigns for most groups. Collings describes the development of AOP's citywide crossing guard campaign:

> The crossing guard issue came up through our local schools organizing. One of the schools said they needed a crossing guard, and at a citywide meeting, others said the same thing. Originally, our demand was to put guards at specific corners around the one school. But then we expanded the campaign, and conducted surveys across the city. This led us to the demand for two hundred more crossing guards around the city.

PSU's citywide campaign emerged from their Student Convention where 400 students from 27 high schools ratified a platform of education reform issues. Generating this platform involved lots of

discussions on the local level with drafts of the issues talked about by students and then presented at the convention for ratification.

School Reform Organizing Strategies

The following discussion focuses primarily on the experiences of the four groups that use a relational approach to building power: AOP, EPOP, PSU and YUC. These groups build power by developing relationships between their constituents and key decision-makers that will advance their reform agenda. In contrast, ACORN and AAU draw on an alternative model for building power that involves assisting their constituencies in building pressure for change from outside the school system. Because ACORN is new to school reform and AAU recently shifted from education to work-related issues, their work is not discussed in detail in the following sections. Their experiences and perspectives are drawn upon to highlight how the differences between the two approaches to building power shape the strategies groups are using in their school reform organizing. While these approaches are polarized in this discussion, the reality of practice is much more complex. It should also be noted that, given AOP's recent shift from sponsoring the organizing efforts of affiliated community groups to hiring organizers directly, this discussion focuses exclusively on AOP's current organizing work.

Outreach to constituencies. The two adult groups begin their school reform organizing by building relationships with parents who are already involved in the school. AOP begins by

> talking to the existing leadership in schools. They point you to people who point you to others. We also stand outside of schools, visit churches and recreation centers. We get the names and contact information of parents and then we meet with them in their homes.

EPOP enters schools where the group has relationships with parents, either as members of EPOP member institutions or churches, or because of relationships those parents may have with EPOP leaders in another schools. Organizers and core leaders in both groups hold one-on-one meetings with parents, followed by a listening campaign to learn about parents' concerns.

AOP and EPOP work to build parent leadership teams in each target school that involve all segments of the parent community, including the school-sanctioned parent group, the Home and School Association (HSA). Gordon Whitman from EPOP explains why:

> We don't want to create just another competing clique of parents. We want to create a broad base that includes all groups. This comes out of our model of faith-based organizing. A church will have lots of committees. You don't want to suck the life out of these committees. Instead, you want to analyze what they do and where the power is and how it is organized so you can build a new group that brings this together and focuses it.

The strategy for working with the HSA varies across schools. In some schools, the HSA leadership works side-by-side with the leadership of the organization, collaborating on its school improvement campaigns. In other schools, members of the organization's leadership team run for election to positions in the HSA, effectively turning the group's parent team into the official HSA. Collings observes:

> If the HSA leaders come and want to work with us, it's a marriage. If they don't come, then one of two things generally happens: a) We try to reach an agreement to co-exist with the HSA. We explain that AOP is doing organizing, which is a different kind of parent involvement than bake sale role of traditional HSA groups. We try to position ourselves as the issue committee of the HSA. OR b) there's a war between HSA and AOP. When this happens, we try to outlive it. We wait until current HSA leaders leave, and then build a new HSA.

"We do a year of organizing work before we build the HSA," Collings continues. "What hasn't worked is when we've tried to go in and convert people. Either we have to wait people out and get our people in, or create totally separate organizations on the ground."

Working with the HSA is one of the first big strategic questions for the group, Whitman says. "In theory the HSA is another piece of the puzzle that the organizer has to figure out to work in the school. It's no different than any other structure within the school; the organizer needs to understand what it is, what purpose it serves, who is on it and how to work with it. If you identify the HSA as a site of power, then you can't ignore it. You have to figure out how to engage those parents." Although HSAs have very little authority, they do sign off on the school's Title I budget and elect parents to the school's advisory school council, which, in turn, has a role in shaping the school's improvement plan. "It's not hard to take over the HSA," Whitman says.

> When EPOP members have run for election on the HSA they always win. Generally, other parents see our leaders as being active and taking on issues to improve the school. But when you take over the HSA, you take on responsibilities that you might not want. On the other hand, if you ignore the HSA, the school can use it against you, and accuse you of dividing parents.

In contrast, AAU and ACORN reach their constituents primarily through neighborhood strategies. They try to involve parents who are outside of the "institutionalized" school-based parent groups like the HSA. AAU has used its summer community youth leadership project as a place to begin a dialogue with youth and parents. ACORN began its school reform organizing by identifying members within its existing base who were interested in improving the schools. At the same time, organizers distributed flyers outside of schools, and canvassed their neighborhoods to learn about residents' concerns. Both AAU and ACORN have built, or are building, local or citywide parent

committees that are not formally affiliated with the school's Home & School Association or the district-level Home & School Council.

Youth groups working inside the school face a different situation, as there is no institutionalized youth organization comparable to the HSA. YUC and PSU conduct outreach to youth during school hours, inside the school. Because high schools typically have such a large catchment area, it is harder to conduct outreach after school when students have dispersed across the surrounding neighborhoods. Both organizations provide youth leadership training in classrooms during the school day; they also hold sessions after school and on weekends. These groups hold chapter meetings on school premises and in nearby community spaces. For example, YUC committees meet in school buildings during after-school hours, as well as in the group's office and in a nearby church.

Campaign development. All six groups develop local and citywide campaigns through a set of activities that involve:

- Leadership training,
- Choosing an issue or set of issues that are local to that school,
- Conducting a survey, listening campaign, or door knocking in the neighborhood to elicit other youth or parents' ideas and concerns,
- Gathering information on reform strategies, often with assistance from advocacy and legal organizations;
- Identifying targets and allies, and
- Developing an organizing strategy to build support for their reform proposal.

The majority of groups begin their work with some kind of leadership development experience. For example, PSU engages youth in team-building activities and helps them analyze the root causes of public school problems. Braxton explains why:

> We spend a lot of time with students on designing their ideal school. Out of this activity, we define our overall vision of a public education system that insures all young people receive a high quality education. This means that students would be involved in decision-making in their schools, and would have ownership over their school, and feel respected and valued by the staff that works in these schools. The teachers would have higher expectations of students and provide work that is engaging and interactive.

Most groups visit effective schools in Philadelphia and other cities. These visits help to expand members' understanding of what makes a good school and ground their organizing in a broader vision of reform. The juxtaposition of visioning and real life examples is important, Braxton argues, because it helps young people develop a broader analysis of both the reasons for school failure and the possibilities of school reform.

Groups have gathered and analyzed data with the assistance of several local organizations: the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF), the Philadelphia Campaign for Children and Youth (PCCY), and more recently, the Center for Public Policy at Temple University. These organizations offer training and information for parents on key school issues such as standards, assessment and curriculum, and help groups formulate their organizing strategies. Collings outlines AOP's basic approach towards integrating this data and strategic assistance into the organizing work:

> Each team decides what they want to work on. People decide what the problems are and then they do some research around the issue through meetings or interviews. This research is brought back to the local or citywide team to be examined and discussed, and the solutions developed. Then the team identifies targets that have the power to make these solutions possible.

The Public Education Fund in particular has played a critical role in focusing groups on how well high schools are preparing students for college. Its *North Philadelphia Compact for College Access* helped groups analyze data on student performance in math and develop demands for improving the math curriculum and instruction in Philadelphia high schools.

At a national level, several groups participate in Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform events. Most recently, the Center for Community Change in Washington D.C., the National Coalition of Education Activists, and the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University in New York City have provided support. In addition, two organizations get strategic support from ACORN National and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), a national network of faith-based organizations.

Gaining access to schools. School reform organizing groups in other cities have typically come up against the problem of establishing themselves as a legitimate parent group and thus gaining access to the formal and informal decision-making processes within schools that shape school practice. Access provides critical information about the school's overall program and activities, as well as detailed knowledge of the quality of instruction and services offered by staff; it also provides the opportunity to develop relationships with school staff that can help define and move the group's reform agenda.

The majority of Philadelphia groups gain access to schools through relationships they develop with people with power in their target school, either the administrator or a core of teachers. For example, because of the prior relationship between YUC's director, Rebecca Rathje, and the staff and principal in a local high school, the organization was able to be "in classrooms doing leadership workshops." Rathje meets students during the school day, and "can hang out in the lunchroom with the kids." AOP's inclusion in former superintendent David Hornbeck's *Children Achieving* reform plan "had a lot to do with getting us positioned as an official organizing operation," Collings says, but the

organization's access came through forming "relationships with local school staff with power that carried us into legitimacy."

These relationships facilitate initial access to schools. Ongoing access, however, rests entirely on the strength of the group's relationship with the power center of the school, and their ability to raise issues that may cause conflict within that relationship. The experiences of groups suggest that it is easier to maintain these "inside-outside" relationships when parent and youth groups play a traditional support and involvement role, or address issues that target policy or practice at other levels of the system. Maintaining these relationships is more difficult when groups ask questions about schooling practices and student outcomes. Whitman observes,

> There's a lot of support from schools when parents talk about climate issues. EPOP has worked on lunch, safety and police protection campaigns... the next part of that cycle is the parent getting involved in education issues, such as reading, bilingual education and graduation rates. That's when you start to get a lot of resistance.

Even though AOP was a partner in *Children Achieving*, Collings says, "Principals still kicked us out." Rathje notes, "Sometimes we can't meet inside school. When it gets controversial, suddenly there's a meeting in the library or it's closed."

Relationship with the school. Given the difficulty of gaining and maintaining access to the school, the decision about which issue to organize around is a critical question for groups. For example, AOP "parents try to pick straightforward issues that do not target the principals as a way to build trust, to get into a school and build unity amongst their ranks."

> In the first two years of our existence, we learned that you have to spend time on campaigns that build a parent team, without targeting the principal, so that you can build a relationship with parents. [When conflict arises with the school] you're either going to be in a position to declare war on that principal or you're not going to be able to organize.

Starting with non-controversial issues allows the organization to develop its base and sufficient power to address issues that are more difficult. Because AOP's crossing guard campaign focused on targets outside of the school, the organization was able to build relationships between teachers and parents. Issues of safety, Collings explains, are "really at the heart and soul of teacher concerns" and have the potential to unite parents, youth and staff.

The majority of groups attempt to engage school staff and administrators in working with parents or youth to formulate reform proposals at an early stage in the organizing campaign. AOP involves school staff in "co-conspiring on solutions," Collings explains.

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> Once we pick an issue, we do a participatory research process that involves meeting with teachers and administrators about possible solutions. Our targets are drawn in from the beginning in helping to think of solutions. You have to birth strategies together with your target.

AOP, EPOP, PSU and YUC begin with a power analysis to identify staff with power in the school and define the common interests between these powerful staff and parents. Groups use one-on-one meetings and listening campaigns to gather information about common concerns and to begin laying the foundation for relationships between parents, teachers and administrators. This strategy is most effective, Whitman explains, when parents come to the table prepared, having already done a lot of thinking and learning about instruction. "In one school, parents did a listening campaign on reading and brought the results with them. They could say, 'We listened to 200 parents and here's what they say about reading.' They were very careful to talk about changes both in the school and at home."

Although building relationships across school constituencies is a key strategy, all four groups believe it is essential to create a space that is owned and controlled by their core constituency, whether parents or youth. YUC and PSU may meet with youth in school during the school day, but they hold their chapter meetings after school, either on school property or in the group's office or in a nearby church or neighborhood center. Reflecting on EPOP's work, Whitman says, "I don't think you can build parent leadership unless you have a parent-only space. Parents won't build relationships with each other if school staff are present, the power dynamics prevent that." Collings notes that AOP's "most successful drives held initial meetings outside the school. You can't create a culture of organizing inside the school."

Targets and Allies. Most groups identify the principal as the main target among a group of targets of their school-level campaigns. Depending on the issue, however, groups also target other school administrators, cluster leaders, the superintendent, the Philadelphia Board of Education and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. The police department has been a target in several school safety campaigns. The current school funding campaign has focused on state officials, as well as on the City Council and Mayor.

The model of organizing used by groups determines how they will approach their campaign targets. Ellen Somekawa, Executive Director of AAU, describes a typical range of tactics for her organization: "We've done different stuff: meetings with principals, protests at school board meetings, petitioning and door-knocking, Asian town meetings with school district officials and the superintendent." All groups also increase their leverage by working, to varying degrees, with other organizing groups, as well as with businesses, local churches, and citywide advocacy and research organizations. AAU also joined with the Education Law Center to sue the district over its failure to provide bilingual services for Asian students. "Building alliances is very important with the relational model of organizing," Collings says.

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> We do a power analysis to see what our common interests are. We develop relationships that will build power for the organization. All allies are fluid; a group may be an ally in some campaigns and not in others. Some of our allies are principals, teachers and mid-level administrators who appreciate the work we do and value organizing.

As part of the "relational" approach to organizing, AOP, EPOP, PSU and YUC emphasize negotiation with school leaders. "In the AOP model we "pre-negotiate" out the wins. The leadership team will go meet with the targets and see where they stand on the issues. If we don't get a positive response, we'll go to the secondary target. The actions that follow are, hopefully, 75% pre-negotiated out. Unlike ACORN, we don't put targets on stage unprepped." Nonetheless, all four groups reported instances where they used pressure tactics such as demonstrations, rallies and student walkouts to force the school to work with them. For example, when the principal would not allow students to do a survey in the school, YUC "did an immediate action outside the school."

These four groups face the challenge of balancing their need to maintain relationships with key school staff with their goal of improving school practice. Questions about performance can lead to conflicts with both administrators and teachers. The pressure to maintain a positive relationship to ensure continued access can discourage groups from challenging their target schools. Rathje believes

> there's a tension when we're organizing inside a school where the principal is the target. We want to hold him or her accountable but [the possibility of] being kicked out can hold you back. Yet one of the strengths of our process is that we're physically in the school. Teachers have to deal with us.

Indeed, Collings notes, this tension led AOP teams "in some instances, to be co-opted, and in other instances, to be uncomfortable with confrontation. Some people in the school district recognized what a threat we were and brought us in just enough to keep us quiet."

Alliances with teachers. The majority of groups believe that forming alliances with individual teachers and with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers is essential to transforming their schools. The union has historically shown little interest in working collaboratively, but Hornbeck's departure, and the community support for teachers during the contract negotiations has created an opening for working together. Although groups are still in the early stages of figuring out how to do this, three distinct approaches to working with teachers at the school level are already evident:

- Holding one-on-one meetings with teachers, including the union representative in the school. These meetings facilitate the development of personal relationships with teachers. AOP has initiated five parent-run, school-based after-school programs that allow parents to open a dialogue with teachers about homework, grading, and standards.

- Helping youth and parents insert their concerns into school decision-making where they can work alongside teachers to address school problems. AOP parent leaders have joined local school

councils and school improvement teams in failing schools. PSU youth are organizing to expand youth participation on local school councils.

- Expanding the school-organizing model to include a teacher-organizing component. AOP recently began organizing teachers around its comprehensive safety, security, and discipline plan campaign in one school.

- Convening local teacher-parent dialogues. In collaboration with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, AOP sponsored sixteen local discussions between teachers and parents about schooling concerns. These discussions led to a joint AOP/PFT platform on school safety, as well as four local campaigns to improve safety, increase library resources and address other issues.

Based on their experiences over the past five years of organizing, most groups believe the teachers and administrators in their target schools are not willing to see parents "as decision-makers in improving the quality of public education." Whitman recalls, "EPOP wanted to look at a series of ways to improve reading in the schools. The biggest issue [with teachers] was whether parents were going to tell them they all had to teach in the same way. Well, no. We wanted a clear approach to teaching and strategy." He continues,

> We realized this has more to do with teacher-to-teacher relations than to teacher-parent relations. Teachers are treated terribly, and the deal is that at least they'll have control of what they do in their classrooms. When parents question what teachers are doing, it challenges that arrangement.

Youth groups report that teachers are often reluctant to work with youth, or to consider youth proposals for change and participation in school improvement discussions. PSU's members also "face obstacles in talking to teachers about professional development. Many people think it's none of their business." When youth confront schooling practices, they are challenging authority figures who have direct decision-making power over their lives. Rathje recalls having "had students harassed, almost kicked out for their organizing and their leadership. Students received bad grades because they were organizing."

Nonetheless, several groups are beginning to build relationships with individual teachers, despite the widespread and negative staff attitudes towards working with parents and young people. Being inside the school gives the group contact with teachers that can, eventually, wear down teacher suspicion and hostility, and support new relationships between teachers and the group's core leadership. PSU has built an alliance with staff at one high school, where teachers are supporting the group's demand for youth participation in selecting a new principal. In this school, teachers also support PSU's proposal to create a regular time for teacher professional development on new instructional methods.

At a citywide level, groups are beginning to develop relationships with the Philadelphia Teachers Union. Through its campaign to address the widespread teacher shortage, AOP opened a dialogue with the teachers union around the teachers' contract that led to jointly convening local teacher-parent dialogues as well as a citywide school funding campaign. AOP believes the union's new receptivity towards this collaboration is due, in part, to the recent departure of Superintendent Hornbeck, who was often at odds with the teachers union and was publicly linked with AOP. ACORN has joined AOP on this campaign. Jeff Ordower reports deciding to focus on class size reduction, in part because "it enables us to build power. If we're going to work with the Teacher's Union and get them out of their shell, this is an issue that is close and dear to them," Ordower says.

Parent and Youth Leadership

All the groups in this study view the development of parent or youth leadership as a critical step towards broader school or neighborhood transformation. They share the belief that members should take the lead in carrying out the organizing work and in shaping the overall direction of the organization. The number of core leaders across the groups ranges between five and twenty. At YUC, Rathje says, "It's all about the young people and their growth and development as leaders. Some of the youth are part of the board of directors as a youth caucus. They're also involved in annual planning and evaluation [activities] for the organization. Along with the board and staff, they participate in looking back over the year and determining where the organization is heading."

Parent organizing groups similarly involve leaders in defining and carrying out their work. AAU, for example, has five leaders who "are involved in mobilizing others. A larger group of twenty-five will come out to meetings and events to deliberate, express opinions, meet with school officials." AOP's parent committees have ten to fifteen leaders who make policy for the organization, conduct research, plan and attend actions, and phone-bank to turn out other members. Adult organizations involve youth in a variety of support activities, such as giving testimony at meetings and helping to mobilize parents for campaign events.

Most groups combine action and training to support the development of leadership skills among members. Examples of youth and parent leadership training experiences include:

- A community youth leadership program developed by AAU to foster leadership skills among high school youth. This program led to a youth-led citywide campaign against a proposed mass transit fare hike for high school youth.

- A several month training through which ACORN members learn how to build a neighborhood group or make an existing neighborhood group stronger. Members are taught organizing skills, such as how to door-knock and conduct follow up visits. ACORN also provides formal leadership training on a quarterly basis, and sends members to National ACORN's weeklong leadership school.

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- A 2-3 day annual Summer Parent Training Institute on leadership development by AOP. AOP conducts 4-5 workshops a year for parents taking leadership roles in their local AOP teams, and brings staff and members together in a yearly retreat to reflect on their school reform organizing campaigns.

Youth groups define developing leadership and building relationships between members as the most important tasks of their organizations. Rathje says, "We've had kids run away and we're the only ones who know about it. We have to deal with a lot of the emotional issues of young people who often don't trust any other adults except us." Most youth don't believe they can make change happen, and most are struggling to understand and balance the many competing demands and pressures in their lives. PSU holds a "a retreat for core leaders to support each other and build stronger relationships." Braxton says:

> Organizations are built on relationships – the big part for us is supporting each other. Young people are going through hard things in their lives; it's not just the issues of a campaign. We try to think about who's having a hard time and figure out how to support people. We also go away for the weekends, hold holiday parties, and do other fun things together. We want to make a space where young people want to be together.

Most of the adult groups believe that the participation of core leaders is sustained by "winning on issues." Somekawa explains how AAU members "had a sense of winning something concrete and learning in the process" of the campaign against higher bus fares. AOP also "devotes a lot of time and attention in individual meetings with leaders to plan and evaluate campaigns." ACORN traditionally relies on its multi-issue approach to keep members connected to the organization. "Our members sustain themselves," Ordower observes. "Our existing base are people who are active in their neighborhoods and see education as one of many issues that ACORN [is working on] that's important to them right now. It will be interesting to see if we can sustain the education members over time because [school reform is] a relatively new thing for us."

Impact and Outcomes

Measuring change. Groups identified a number of indicators of progress towards meeting their goals of empowering their constituencies, building their organizations and transforming their schools and communities. In part because of how difficult it is to concretize (and make measurable) the personal, institutional and societal changes groups seek, most groups look primarily for changes in the number and nature of constituency participation in their work. This participation can be tracked along one indicator, such as turnout at meetings, or it can be tracked along a number of indicators, as in the case of PSU:

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> In addition to making real changes in schools, it's equally important to us to help young people become life long learners. So, one level of success is the difference we make in young people's lives; the number of young people involved with us; students who graduate from high school because they were involved with us; how many students see themselves as leaders; how many students come back to us as staff organizers.

All groups also look for changes in their influence over school staff, district officials and other political leaders. Indicators include:

- The extent of agreement reached with school officials and political leaders on school reform demands;
- Responsiveness of staff and administrators at the school and district leadership to group requests for meetings;
- Responsiveness of school staff towards parents;
- Proactive contact between staff with parents, and
- Media coverage of campaign actions that articulate the group's point of view and interview leaders.

Groups generally track their progress on these indicators on a regular, but largely ad-hoc basis. They hold annual strategic planning retreats with staff, leaders and other members, collect sign-in sheets from meetings and events, and conduct group evaluations after actions and meetings with campaign targets. In AOP, for example, "Evaluation is built into our leadership development strategy. Our leadership debriefs before and after an action. In the evaluation, we ask, did we accomplish what we wanted? Were the reactions we created intended or unintended?" YUC and PSU, however, reported including a formal self-evaluation by youth members as part of their annual assessment process. PSU conducts youth surveys at the beginning and end of the school year.

Most groups find it difficult to measure their progress towards their goal of improving schools. To the extent that campaign demands represent intermediary goals, they look at the progress in winning their demands. Two groups also look at data on standardized test scores, student attendance and graduation rates to assess whether their schools are improving as a result, for example, of a change in school leadership or the introduction of a new math program. At the high school level, graduation rates and the percentages of students who can pass the college ready exam at local colleges are also key indicators of progress.

Organizing successes. In a relatively short time, Philadelphia groups have brought more parents and youth into their organizations, and have contributed to changing the nature of interaction between

parents and youth and school staff and administrators. Through this work, they have helped build new leadership skills among parents, and relationships between parents, residents and youth that, as Collings observes, support "the increase of social capital and civic participation in the larger community." Moreover, they have also achieved a number of victories in their target schools as well as at the district-wide level.

All the groups report an increase in the size of their membership and in the role parents or youth play in the organizing work. Rathje notes, "Our biggest success is in the development of youth leadership and the number of young people who join our organization." Several groups also saw a difference in their members' ability to interact successfully with school staff. Somekawa tells the story of a recent immigrant parent who had to move out of Chinatown:

> She was an active, consistent participant although not very vocal. When her kid was subject of a racial attack, she want to school to meet with principal, documented everything, raised the issue with other parents. You could tell that her participation in the [AAU-affiliated] Chinese Parents Association had helped her to participate.

ACORN, which is newest to the work, reported their "largest success has been identifying leaders with an interest in schools." Collings, from AOP, "You can count the increasing number of AOP leaders engaged in leadership roles on local and citywide levels," despite the significant transitions the organization is currently experiencing.

> We are building power; we've been able to confront some issues that are controversial and still not be kicked out of the school entirely. There are times when the school makes it very difficult to be there, but we're getting a lot of recognition for the work we do. The district knows they have to deal with us.
>
> Youth United for Change

New relationships between members, and between the organization and key decision-makers in the school system, demonstrate an increase in what Collings calls "the relational power for parents." This increased power is evident in the increased responsiveness of school decision-makers to parent and youth concerns. Rathje says, "YUC can call and ask for a meeting and get it within a week."

Groups report a number of significant victories on their school improvement goals, as shown in Table 4. These include winning a lawsuit that requires schools to provide bilingual services and programs for Asian students to a variety of improvements in school facilities, safety policies and classroom materials. This work has increased youth and parental access to key schooling decisions about the curriculum that's taught, the way schools use their resources, and the types of supports that are available to help students succeed. AOP parent teams, for example, have "been involved in writing the budget and school plans."

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Table 4: Organizing Successes

Facilities and school climate • Reduced overcrowding • Building repairs: water fountains, new bathrooms, school yard paved • Improved bathroom policies • Socialized (structured) recess for students • School bus service for Chinatown for kindergarten kids • School culture is more parent-friendly and proactive • Murals with parents, teachers and students • Parent bilingual clubs
Improving teaching and learning in low performing schools • Replaced general math with algebra • Increased reading levels in elementary school • Increased professional development for teachers • Bilingual education in a public school and a high school • More money for textbooks
Equity and racial justice • Helped win $15 million dollars from city government for schools • Helped defeat governor's voucher plan • Helped get two bills introduced into the legislature to change school funding • Defeated a bus fare hike
Access and accountability • More relational power for parents (more relationships with school board, cluster leaders, superintendent) • Parents being able to hold school leadership accountable • Increased numbers of parents at meetings • More parents and youth engaged in leadership roles on local and citywide levels • Increase in social capital and civic participation in the larger community

The organizing has also led to improved student attendance and outcomes on standardized tests. For example, since YUC began working at Kensington High School in 1994-5, attendance has improved significantly. Rathje explains:

> When we won the math campaign, we had a student plan that said 9th graders should get special attention and have an academy. A hundred students with same four core subject teachers. Teachers would have to call parents if students don't show. Attendance went up twenty-five percent. The principal needed support to get teachers to restructure the school. We wanted students to choose small learning

> academies, get rid of general math. We said, "let's do an action where you publicly say these things." Scores went up.

Reflecting on EPOP's work, Whitman says, " We've seen some real progress where parents have organized. Parents are able to hold school leadership accountable and when appropriate to bring in new school leadership."

Challenges

Most groups are skeptical about their ability to fundamentally change schools, despite the impressive list of victories they report. The challenges facing groups fall into four main areas:

1) Negative attitudes of school systems towards parents, youth and community groups;
2) Instability within the school system,
3) Limited internal capacity of community organizing groups; and
4) Ongoing stresses in the lives of parents and youth.

Each of these areas is discussed below.

Negative attitudes towards parents, youth and community groups. Groups report widespread negative attitudes among school and district staff and administrators towards parents, youth and community groups. Somekawa expressed frustration at "feeling like you don't have any control over administration in the school –the school doesn't feel like a community institution." Other groups echoed this view: Eric Braxton, of PSU, notes the difficulty in "getting people to talk to us and be open to talking to students." Whitman observes "the system is very resistant to people playing the role [of decision-makers.]" This perception of disrespect and hostility is further exacerbated by the lack of representation on district staff of new and emerging populations within the district. Somekawa notes that "There's not a single Asian on the school board, only 2or 3 in central administration. The ratio inside schools of Asian staff to kids is abominable."

Community organizations also report a widespread lack of understanding of community organizing, and its importance, among most teachers and administrators. AOP, which was part of the superintendent's reform plan, notes:

> Organizing is not accepted as a resource. The rest of the bureaucracy doesn't buy into it. The superintendent was a partner in lip service but not in action. His vision of community organizing in his education reform plan was thousands of parents screaming at the state to get more money for the system. He didn't understand that the base had to be built locally, and that meant conflict and tension at the local and district level.

Youth groups encounter even more resistance. Rathje says, "We have to fight harder to be taken seriously no matter what we do."

Groups also identify the dysfunctional culture and norms for parental involvement in large urban systems as an impediment to their work. In the Philadelphia schools, each school is required to have its own official "parent involvement" group, the Home and School Association (HSA). These HSAs send representatives to a citywide council, called the Home and School Council. But this official parent involvement apparatus can get in the way of external parent organizing. It draws leaders away and can overwhelm them with a range of essentially "school support and information dissemination" activities.

Instability within the school system. Leadership turnover, chronic under-funding and ongoing conflict between the district and the teachers' union add to the overall instability of the district, and make it difficult for school reform organizing to take hold. This is particularly notable given the relative stability of the system for six years under the leadership of one superintendent. Several groups raised examples of short-lived victories. AAU parents worked with the principal and won several demands for improvement, but then the administration changed. In another school, they "won a commitment for a bilingual program from the superintendent, only to have the program implemented in a school with a hostile principal. "It was a very dis-empowering victory," Somekawa recalls. Rathje, reflecting on YUC's algebra campaign, observes: "We got rid of general math but then found out there was watered down Algebra being taught." In another school,

> We had a great relationship with the principal who was a strong advocate for students. He took a promotion in the middle of the school year. The school was in total chaos. It shows how these high schools are just hanging on by a shoestring -- any little change can make or break it. Now we're back to ground zero.

These stories reveal the enormous difficulty groups face in bringing about school transformation. The change process is both idiosyncratic and fragile, and is shaped, more often than not, by factors far outside the organizing group's control. Moreover, the size of the system makes it difficult for groups to monitor changes taking place within the system. Collings voices a typical frustration when she asks, "How are you supposed to approach change in such a massive bureaucracy?" Rathje sums it up this way: "You organize, you win and if you're not vigilant, a lot goes back to the way it was."

Limited internal capacity of community organizing groups. A number of stresses and constraints within organizations also pose challenges to sustaining the organizing work. Several groups raise the need for additional funding and staffing if they are to have a shot at transforming the school system. Four of the organizations have between 3 and 5 full-time staff, and four organizations have an overall budget under 200,000. A number say they struggle to find staff with the organizing experience and knowledge of education reform necessary to carry out this work effectively. AAU, in particular, reports difficulty in "finding bilingual staff that have a perspective on organizing."

Just as critically, the groups' experiences surface a number of important, and difficult, strategic questions for community organizing for school reform:

How can groups raise issues that get at the instructional core of schools without losing the access they need to organize effectively? If, as both EPOP and AOP have observed, access changes when parents address instructional issues, then the groups' emphasis on building and maintaining relationships with key school personnel can discourage them from applying external pressure for change. All four groups identified this tension as an inherent challenge of their relational approach.

Second, how can groups mobilize people around complex teaching and learning campaigns where there is no clear adversarial target? Collings explains,

> I struggle with how to build a base when you can't move people off raw anger. A different kind of parent stays involved in this [relational] kind of organizing.... they're not as clear about what power means and tend to have a more status quo orientation. We try desperately to find targets outside of the school for our campaigns to bring in new people [who are angry about schooling conditions and want to change the system]. We want to channel this energy into campaigns on other schooling problems.

Third, what are the small victories that will sustain members through long school improvement campaigns? Philadelphia groups, like others around the country, have a very small group of core leaders. Most campaigns experience ups-and-downs in member participation. School improvement campaigns that tend to be longer and more complex in nature have the most difficulty in sustaining member participation.

Fourth, how can schools be effectively integrated into institution-based organizing groups? As Whitman explains, bringing schools into the organization along side the churches is tricky because they are not parallel institutions. The school is both a target and a member institution.

Stresses on the lives of parents and youth. Competing stresses and demands on the lives of parents and youth work against their long-term involvement in the organizing work. For example, AAU's membership is largely new immigrant families. Parents in Chinatown typically work 12 to 16 hours a day at more than one job. EPOP reports "parents move from schools a lot." Youth groups believe "having students believe they can make changes is the biggest challenge," Braxton says. "Sometimes we're successful and sometimes we're not."

ORGANIZATIONS WITH THE POTENTIAL TO DO SCHOOL REFORM ORGANIZING

We spoke with a number of experts with a history of involvement in the Philadelphia school system regarding organizations that might have the interest and capacity to do school reform organizing. They identified three organizations as strong candidates because of their prior history with school reform organizing:

The Philadelphia Interfaith Action (PIA) had an education committee in the early 90's, but this work ended when Gary Rodwell, PIA's lead education organizer, left to start the Alliance Organizing Project.

The Norris Square Civic Association and Asian Americans United (AAU) were former sponsor organizations of the Alliance Organizing Project. As mentioned earlier this report, while AAU was engaged in education organizing for almost a decade, it recently shifted focus because of the difficulties of finding qualified bilingual staff and the changing priorities of its membership.

The Alliance Organizing Project's experience with sponsor organizations is instructive for groups considering education organizing. In the original AOP model, the organization provided funds to community-based organizations to "sponsor" education organizing in one or more schools of the school cluster in which they were geographically located. But the work was troubled by a lack of clarity and agreement between AOP and some of its sponsor organizations about what defines and characterizes education organizing. And it was hampered by a supervisory structure in which organizers reported to both their local community organization and AOP. This arrangement broke down when AOP and the local group's director had different conceptions about the work to be done. As one observer explained, organizing is about building relationships, and this work takes time and attention to process. Most development and service groups are project-oriented, and tend to expect tangible outcomes on a faster timetable. The organizers were pulled in two directions by these competing expectations, which often undermined their ability to work effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philadelphia school system is a system in flux – its current administration has uprooted many of the reforms introduced over the past decade. The district is under the almost constant threat of state takeover and is engaged in a protracted battle for more resources. During this period, community organizing groups are both an anchor and a persistent force for change – helping to keep the focus of district and city and state political leaders on fundamental questions of accountability and access in the Philadelphia public schools.

Through their efforts, the six groups in this study are reshaping the relationship between parents and youth and the public schools. They are developing a core of knowledgeable, skilled youth and parent leaders, and are building strong and lasting organizations committed to transforming the quality of education available to their constituencies.

But much work is yet to be done. The organizing described in this study currently touches only a small number of schools. Many of the reforms groups helped introduce can be easily undone in the current upheaval. Our conversations with groups surfaced four major recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of their work:

1) Increase the core support funding for organizing groups to develop their internal capacity to carry out this work. The six groups in this study are attempting to leverage change in a system of 264 schools serving 200,000 students with meager resources and a handful of staff. Bringing their work to scale will require a much greater funding investment in these groups and others like them.

2) Create a training institute to help recruit and prepare education organizers. This might be done through a collaborative like the New York City Training Institute for Community Organizing that recruits, trains and provides internships for prospective organizers.

3) Encourage collaboration between organizing groups and advocacy and research organizations. Community organizing groups generally do not have the time, access or expertise to do the background research and data analysis needed to inform and bolster their reform proposals. Research and advocacy organizations can collect and analyze data, and develop visual data presentations for community groups to use, if they are encouraged to work in partnership with community groups. ACORN and AOP's work with the National Center for Schools and Communities is one example of a useful and effective collaboration.

4) Help increase the number of philanthropic organizations that support the concept of community organizing and leadership development, and understand the contribution community organizing makes to school improvement. Regular dialogue through, for example, presentations by community groups for foundation staff and trustees might help to build support among funders.

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